DEKRA

WHITE PAPER

The Strategic Building Blocks to Establish
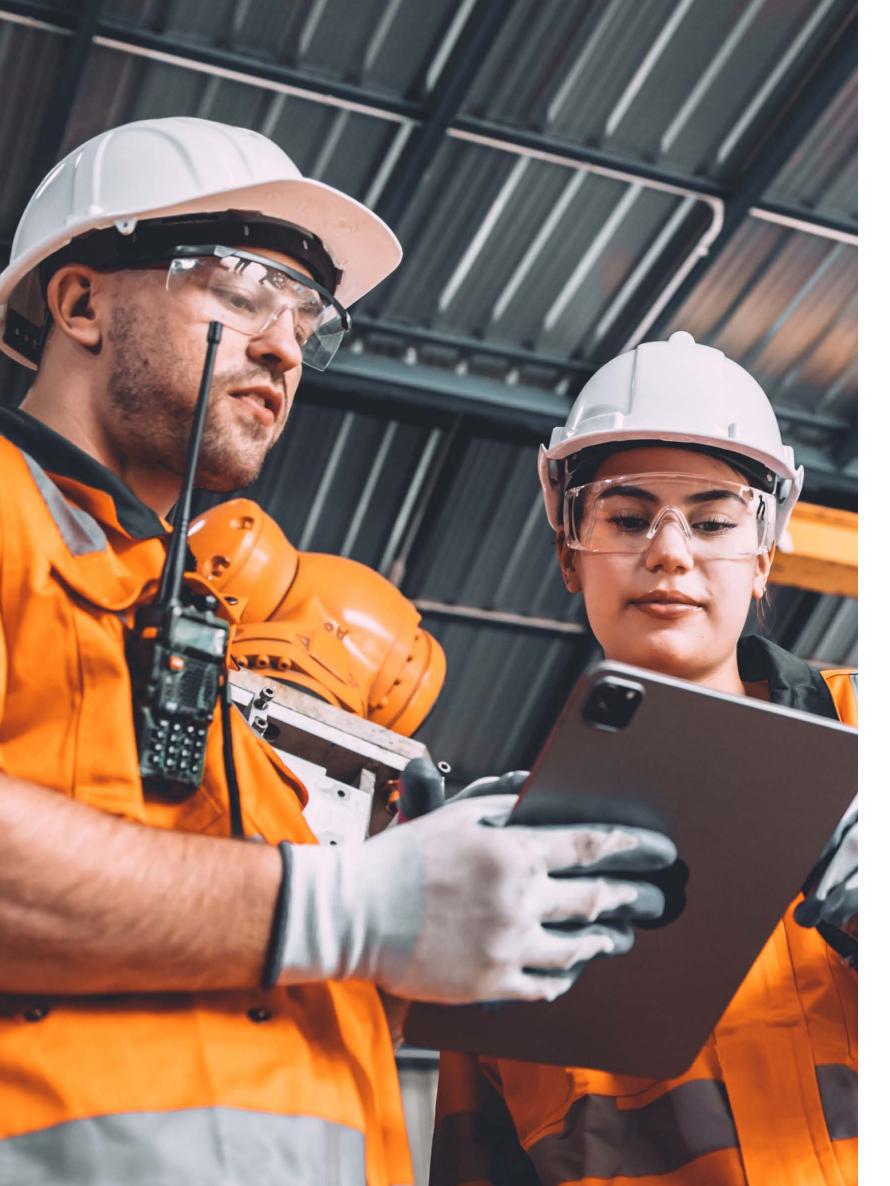# and Sustain Your
Culture of Safety

What is a Culture of Safety?

In a Culture of Safety, the value an organization has for safety is omnipresent. That value is embraced by leadership, visible in the physical conditions, observable in interactions between anyone at the organization's location and is displayed in the way employees talk with pride about their safety achievements. Most importantly, a Culture of Safety is about identifying and controlling exposure and creating an environment that is focused on total worker wellbeing.

Exposure is the condition where the individual and the hazard intersect. A Culture of Safety, therefore, focuses on exposure in producing reliable safety performance, properly controlling both serious injuries and fatalities (SIFs) and catastrophic incidents. For this reason, a Culture of Safety is relevant both in organizational and process safety.

A Culture of Safety is the result of a greater focus in general than on just safety alone. Focusing on safety itself does not by itself create a Culture of Safety. Instead, a Culture of Safety is more holistic in the way it improves the experience of the employee, contractor and visitor. In fact, safety is an independent variable in the equation of safety excellence.

Creating and maintaining safety excellence requires three strategic blocks to be present:

- High Organizational Functioning
- Human Performance Reliability
- A Learning Orientation

To explore this further, here is a breakdown of each:

High Organizational Functioning

High Organizational Functioning is the role people play in affecting how work is accomplished. To be effective requires four factors:

- **Team Functioning.** How do the employees work together? Do they cooperate to accomplish important tasks? How do they approach one another? This quality is ultimately about teamwork.

- **Supervisor Functioning.** How do supervisors support and get the best out of their people? Are they fair in their decision-making? Are they approachable? Do they listen to and act upon employees' input?

- **Management Functioning.** This factor is about how credible management is, balancing what they say with what they actually do; how management removes barriers that are system-based and tied to the organizational structure; and how management optimizes the employee experience. This begins by making employees feel safe at work, showing ways that the organization and senior leaders care about their safety and management's focus on exposure.

- **A Relentless Focus to Control Exposure.** This factor is about supporting critical exposure identification in an effort to remove exposures that may cause a fatality, severe injury or a catastrophic event.

Human Performance Reliability

Having a Learning Orientation means people are seeking information to increase their knowledge and skills to solve problems effectively. Building a learning orientation requires leaders who:

Do not blame workers. Instead, leaders identify root causes. They don't focus on who did what, but what happened and why. They will explore the processes, equipment, tools, environment and facilities that led the incident to happen. They'll also pursue what role the organization played in the outcome.

- **Innovate.** These are leaders who are willing to think "out of the box" within a change management process. They are open to different ways of doing things to get to the same goal of avoiding disruptions, from minor failures to catastrophes.

- **Engage.** Too often leaders remain holed up in their offices and consider safety as something only frontline supervisors deal with. However, successful leaders create change in ways that increase productivity and commitment

across all levels of the organization, and they demonstrate their personal commitment to managing exposure and protecting people.

- **Adapt.** Transformational change leaders are agile, resilient, and are quick to respond to unexpected events. Strong safety leaders are ready to act and to switch gears, if necessary, to save lives. They understand change is a process and the ability to respond in overtime is essential.

- **Reinforce.** To support learning, transformational leaders align behaviors, culture, and systems so they all support a successful change effort. They seek opportunities to coach around both the actual change as well as how people are managing the change.

Connecting the Three Strategic Blocks of Safety Excellence

Simply defined, culture is "the way we do things around here." That logically would suggest that Culture of Safety is "how we do safety around here." The appeal of cultivating a culture of safety – beyond protecting people – is that it requires optimizing the same systems and elements that support excellence across the general business. To sustain excellence, a Culture of Safety cultivates an effective functional organization, with high human performance reliability strategies and continuous learning.

For example, the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on organizations that were able to quickly and successfully respond to wholesale societal change. These are the same organizations that are most likely to survive any kind of changing landscape. In other words, they had the ability to:

- Adjust how their organization functioned. In the case of COVID-19, this meant moving to virtual communication, sustaining connections with each other, adjusting client deliverables to meet changing customer needs.

- Maintain a careful listening and view of weak signals. Highly functional organizations also cultivated a sense of curiosity and urgency to seek the information and solve problems in new ways. They acted quickly and put protocols in place long before OSHA guidelines were defined.
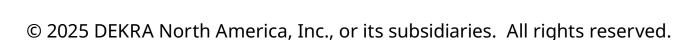
- Learn new skills. They were quickly able to adapt to new technology, like virtual communication and find opportunities amid the chaos to develop new insights and help others grow and develop alongside them.

When supported by these three strategic blocks, the culture of an organization identifies and controls business exposure related to productivity, customer satisfaction, company reputation, financial performance, fiduciary and government responsibilities, and employees and community well-being.

When applied to process and occupational safety, any organization is capable of establishing and sustaining *Culture of Safety Excellence*.

Questions Every Leader Needs to Ask to Create and Sustain a Culture of Safety

Leaders who ask the right questions can shape a culture that supports good function, performance reliability and learning. Here are 10 sets of questions leaders can start asking today to get their organizations on the right path – and keep them there:

1. Do we as leaders understand our employees' experiences from their viewpoints? How do we know? Do we truly understand their concerns, their fears?

2. Do we know the exposure map of our organization? Especially:
   • Where the serious injury and fatality exposures exist?
   • The systems and controls that prevent a catastrophic event?
   • How and when the most frequent injuries occur?
   • Are we doing something different about control, both through our leadership and our support, to remove barriers for effective action?

3. Do we know the relationship between the supervisor and employees? Specifically:
   • Are supervisors spending time on the floor with employees looking at process controls or personal exposure?
   • Are they having conversations that are collaborative or always confrontational?
   • Are supervisors supported by senior leadership in a way that allows them to succeed?

4. Are we as leaders paying attention to weak signals – both the process and the concerns of employees?

5. Do we know whether or not what we did last year helped or hurt in how employees view us as safety leaders?

6. How are we promoting and reinforcing curiosity in our frontline employees and supervisors? Have we made it easy for people to speak up with concerns and ideas?

7. How do we model "thinking out of the box?" Do we show support for new ideas, even when they don't pan out?

8. How are we building agility and resilience? For example, are we as leaders providing positive feedback when an employee stops the line for something he or she thought was incorrect? Or, based on what we did, will that become the last time anyone stops the line?

9. How are leaders of our organization taking steps to align behaviors, systems and culture to position everyone for success?

10. How are we coaching others to strengthen our organization to prepare for the future?

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